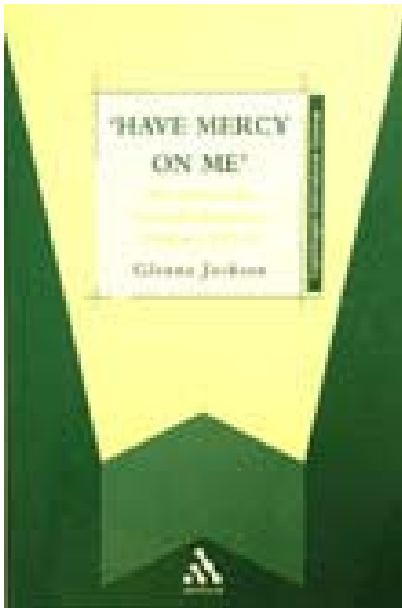


RBL 07/2004



**Jackson, Glenna**

***“Have Mercy on Me”: The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15.21–28***

Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 228

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002. Pp. xiv + 197. Hardcover. \$115.00. ISBN 0826461484.

Luzia Sutter Rehmann  
Basel University  
Basel, Switzerland 4102

Glenna Jackson has presented an accessible analysis of Matt 15:21–28. The tale of the Canaanite woman is well able to withstand being made the center of attention as a single story. It is short, to be sure, but rich in theological power. The author defends a single thesis and leads readers consistently to her conclusion: the Canaanite woman is not a Gentile but a proselyte.

Matthew’s writing is, according to Jackson, rooted in the desire to produce a Gospel that establishes rules for proselytism in the community. “The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman was not included in Matthew’s Gospel for the purpose of recording the evangelizing of Gentiles, but for the purpose of supporting the Jewish tradition of gaining entrance into the community as a proselyte” (143). Thus far everything is clear and understandable. Jackson’s thesis is not new. The Canaanite woman is identified as a proselyte not just by the author of the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*; the same thesis can be read in the *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, where in her commentary on the Gospel of Matthew Martina Gnadl argues that the Canaanite woman was familiar with the language of the Psalms of Israel and that she asked Jesus for help like other Jewish petitioners (15:23; see also 9:27; 17:15; 20:30). The Canaanite woman called Jesus “son of David,” and doing so confessed her faith that he was the healing Messiah of

Israel. Her language and faith reveal her as one of the many proselytes who choose Judaism and its God (Martina Gnadt, “Das Matthäus Evangelium,” in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* [ed. L. Schottroff and M. Th. Wacker; Gütersloh, 1998], 495).

Nevertheless, the thesis is a good one, and Glenna Jackson defends it thoroughly and patiently. However, what is irritating to the reader is the fact that she does not go on to use this thesis as a starting point for new exploration. The Matthean community was open to proselytes—hence Matthew’s editing of Mark 7:24–30 and of the genealogy (Matt 1:1ff.), where he inserted the four non-Jewish women. But what is the consequence for the Matthean community or the Matthean message? Here the author remains vague. What does reinforcement of the Jewish law, when it is required by an Evangelist, mean for Christian theology? Here I would like some suggestions to stimulate further debate. Martina Gnadt, for example, has brought in hermeneutical considerations. The framework of Gentile Christianity versus Jewish Christianity is not an appropriate one for comprehending the Canaanite woman and her story. She was a Gentile who became a proselyte, and as such she recognized Jesus as the healing Messiah. Therefore, the concept of “Gentile Christianity” that is used by many commentaries and interpreters might well be criticized by Matthew as an anachronistic projection of the strict differentiations of Judaism, Gentiles, and Christianity back into the first century.

However, I could not concur with the conclusion to the author’s argument based on the female proselyte mentioned in the Gospels: “The evangelist chooses Mark’s story of the Syrophenician woman because of its female specificity—the wives of Israel’s enemies are not excluded from conversion into Judaism” (100). “Designated enemies”—that is, men from the Canaanite, Hittite, and Moabite peoples—were, according to the author, “prohibited from converting to Judaism,” but I have not been able to find convincing evidence for this statement in her book. On the contrary, the reminder of Judas Iscariot acts as evidence against it. Jackson suggests that the term “Iscariot” can be a geographic label, indicating that he came from Cana or Moab. “It appears then that the disciple Judas cannot necessarily be assumed to be Jewish; if he is a Moabite, he is a designated enemy of Israel and the story needs to be examined in that light” (66–67). Furthermore, the author knows that the rabbis always accepted converts from these people: “There was never any objection to accepting converts from these people; and we have several specific instances of such conversions on record” (82).

According to the author, the study employs the historical-critical methodology, concentrating on source, form, and editorial criticisms (24). Jackson has placed weight on the issue of the editorial hand of Matthew, which is central for her thesis. The analysis of Greek terms such as *kynarios* (54–58), however, is rather tentative and wooden. She lists

some uses of *kynes* in the Bible, in Ugaritic texts, and in Assyrian archeological finds—though the Matthean text uses *kynarios*, the pet form of “dog.” She concludes that expressions such as *dog*, *swine*, and *prostitute* are to be understood as metaphors for outcasts, but on the other hand the Hebrew word for “dog” can be used to mean a faithful servant of God. Consequently, she states, the message is mixed. “Dog—is it a scavenger, servant of God, or lesser deity?” (57).

Her survey remains eclectic because she does not clearly state whether she was looking for *kynes*, *kynarios*, or the Hebrew *keleb*—and if these expressions were used differently in different places or times. Nor did she search for sociohistorical facts about people’s cohabitation with dogs in the city or in the villages, what the lives of dogs were like, if they were held as property by one owner (as we would expect today), or if dogs lived alone or in packs, hated or feared by most people. So “dog” remains just a literal metaphor, a means to mark someone’s social position, but does not really reflect the daily life experience of people, especially of poor people, living on the streets at the same level as the ever-hungry packs of dogs, fighting with them over the last crumb of bread.

The eclectic analysis leads me to the question: Why does Jackson not mention the fact that the Canaanite woman seems to speak of herself as a single parent, which then as now involved an increased probability of poverty and marginalized social status? Why does she not take into account that the Canaanite woman might be a proselyte and poor, hungry and desolate, an expert in Jewish psalms of lamentation because her life was lamentable?

The Brazilian liberation theologian Ivoni Richter Reimer notes that the Canaanite woman becomes a teacher of Jesus because she sees something that Jesus does not. The woman argues from her experience of hunger, poverty, and life on the same level as the scavenging dogs. The context of poverty sharpens her perception. She wins the life-saving power of the smallest crumbs of bread through her clear perception of how dogs feed themselves under the table (Ivoni Richter Reimer, “Widerstand und Hoffnung,” in *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedrohten Welt* [ed. Dorothee Sölle; Gütersloh, 1994], 66–70).

According to the author, a feminist critique is the underpinning of this study. But what exactly does this “feminist critique” relate to? How does Jackson define feminist critique, and what is its object? Elaine Wainwright, for instance, says of interpreting the story of the Canaanite woman, “As a result of our feminist critique rereading, it has become clear that female power has once again endured against all the barriers the patriarchal culture had erected against it. . . . The subversive power of this story goes far beyond the traditional boundary breaking with which it is associated—namely, Gentile mission. This

woman stands here as a foremother not only of Gentile Christians but also of women freed from all restrictive and oppressive socioreligious bondage” (E. Wainwright, 654).

Glenna Jackson’s focus is on the role of the proselyte in Gospel of Matthew. She assumes that the story of the Canaanite woman is feminine-specific and could not be replaced by a story of a Canaanite man because men of Cana or Moab (as designated enemies) could not convert to Judaism. But where is the feminist critique? The reader will not find any hermeneutical reflections about the task of a feminist-oriented method. Opposing the interpretation of Elaine Wainwright, it could be made a point by recognizing the woman as a proselyte, the model of an outsider who crosses religious borders falls short of the Matthean text.